

Policy Brief:

Kentucky's Licensing Program for Young Drivers

Approximately 36 fatal crashes and 2600 injury crashes were prevented during the first four years of Kentucky's Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) Program for young drivers.

Teen Motor Vehicle Crashes: A Statewide Problem

The involvement of teenaged drivers (16-19 years old) in motor vehicle crashes continues to be a serious problem in Kentucky as well as throughout the United States. In 1999, the Commonwealth's teenage death rate was almost three times the rate for other licensed drivers. During 1995-1999, teen drivers were associated with 24% of Kentucky injury crashes despite representing only 6.4% of licensed drivers. The total cost for fatalities, injuries and property damage is estimated to be \$186 million per year for all reported crashes involving 16 and 17-year-old drivers¹. Many of these crashes are preventable and therefore, the associated costs and deaths are also preventable.

Kentucky's Partial Graduated Licensing Program

Thirty-two states have addressed the problem of teenaged driver crashes with full Graduated Driver License (GDL) programs. This legislation, in various forms from state to state, includes:

- Restrictions to help protect young drivers from hazardous situations while they learn to drive
- An extended supervised learning period to improve driving skills and decision making
- Sanctions to help motivate young drivers to drive safely

Requiring the new drivers to prove themselves to be safe drivers (by having no traffic violations) before progressing to a level with fewer restrictions is a key element of most GDL programs². However, this requirement is not a part of Kentucky's program.

Kentucky's current program includes: (a) a six-month learning permit level, which may start at age 16; (b) a restriction on driving after midnight during the permit level; (c) a six-point limit on traffic violations to age 18, with a penalty of license suspension; and (d) a requirement for a four-hour driving education class (House Bill 400). In addition, blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits are lower (0.02 dl/ml) for drivers under age 21.

Using current National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) guidelines, Kentucky's teen driver program does not meet the minimum requirements for a full GDL program. To qualify to become a full GDL program, Kentucky needs the following three provisions: (a) a visibly distinguishable intermediate level license, (b) a limit on unsupervised nighttime driving in the intermediate stage, and (c) a requirement to be free of traffic violations for a period of time before graduating to the next level of licensure.³

The Impact on Teen Driver Crashes

Researchers at the Kentucky Transportation Center and Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center have examined teen crash data for three years (1993-1995) before and four years (1997-2000) after Kentucky enacted its teen licensing program. Results indicate a 31% reduction in crashes for 16-year-old drivers after the program, and a similar reduction in fatal crashes (31%) and injury crashes (33%). This reduction is due to the 83% decrease in crashes for drivers age 16 to 16 1/2. Cost analysis indicates an estimated reduction of \$36 million per year in 16-year-old teen driver crash-related expenses.

Unfortunately, there have been no decreases in the number of crashes or traffic violations for drivers past the learner permit level (which requires adult supervision). The rate of crashes per miles driven for 16-year-olds with a license is about three times higher than for Kentucky 16-year-olds with a permit. Therefore, although Kentucky's program has saved lives, reduced injuries and reduced crash costs for permit age drivers, there is no current evidence that Kentucky's "partial-GDL" program has sufficiently addressed the teen crash problem for drivers past the permit license phase. Results from this study indicate a need for additional measures to decrease crashes in the 16 1/2 to 18-year-old age group.¹

High Risk Driving for 16 and 17-year-olds

For drivers over age 16 1/2, the current program has failed to address higher risk situations; it has not reduced fatal crashes during nighttime hours, has not reduced crashes when teen passengers are in the vehicle and has not affected safety restraint use.

The current nighttime driving restriction during the permit level does not include the hours nor the ages when higher number of crashes occur in Kentucky.¹ An alarming 24% of fatal crashes involving 16 year-old drivers occurred from 9pm to midnight, the hours before the driving restriction starts. In addition, young Kentucky drivers have an increased chance of causing a single-vehicle accident when driving with peers.⁴ Nationally, the driver death rate for 16 and 17-year-olds is more than two and one-half times higher between 10pm and midnight than during daytime hours and more than five times higher between 10pm and midnight with passengers than during daytime hours without passengers. The risk is even higher after midnight. The death rate for drivers in this age group increases with the number of passengers.⁵

Inattention, inexperience, over estimation of driving skills and risky behavior are primary causes of teen crashes. Crashes at intersections, rear end crashes, crashes resulting from passing maneuvers and single vehicle crashes are the most frequent types of crashes for 16-year-old and 17-year-old drivers in Kentucky.⁶

Implementation of Kentucky's Licensing Program at the Local Level

Researchers interviewed 100 persons who implement or are affected by Kentucky's GDL and received opinions through surveys from 40 judges and 600 law enforcement officers. Results indicate insufficient driving experience and insufficient protection from risky situations for some permit level drivers. Participants noted a widespread lack of awareness of the nighttime driving restriction and a substantial number of teen drivers receiving little driving time during the permit level. Some GDL provisions were reported to be difficult to enforce. Non-cumulative penalties for teen DUI (0.02 BAC) cases and license suspension after several traffic violations may not be having a sufficient deterrent effect on teen drivers.

Furthermore, participants noted that Kentucky teen driver licenses are easily altered/fabricated to allow underage purchase of alcohol, and parents/ guardians may be unaware their teen has had any traffic violations. Efforts should be made to increase parental enforcement of restrictions that are difficult for law enforcement agencies to monitor, such as the nighttime driving restriction and the adult supervision requirement. This research has identified a need for educational efforts targeted towards communities, parents, law enforcement, and judicial agencies to help increase community support, facilitate enforcement and increase compliance with provisions of the program.⁷

Implications for State Policy

Legislative enhancements are recommended to address crash trends, persistently high crash rates, and the high number of injuries for drivers ages 16.5 through 17. Full GDL programs in other states and countries are addressing these issues.⁸ The following eight components comprise a full graduated licensing program, which rewards young drivers by removing restrictions for drivers who demonstrate they can drive safely (no violations).²

1. *Create three distinctive licensing levels.

Level 1. Learner permit, six months minimum
Level 2. Intermediate license, six months minimum
Level 3. Full license

2. *Create a visually distinctive license for Level 2.
3. *Require teens to be free of traffic violations for six-months before moving to the next level of licensure. Require parents/guardians to be notified of teen's traffic violations.

4. *Prohibit unsupervised nighttime driving between the hours of 10pm and 5am during Level 2 (driving to/from work or school is permitted anytime).

5. **Restrict the number of non-family member passengers during Level 2.

6. **Require a minimum of 50 hours of driving practice, with 10 hours of nighttime driving, during Level 1.

7. Require the existing educational component to be completed before progressing to Level 3.

8. *Require the use of safety restraints for all persons in a vehicle driven by Level 1 or Level 2 drivers.

* Denotes Core requirement for a Full GDL Program

** Denotes Optimal GDL requirement

Motor vehicle crashes have no ethnic, socio-economic, or area boundaries, consequently, legislation related to this issue benefits the Commonwealth, communities and individuals. It should be remembered that driving is a privilege, and as such, limitations can be and need to be imposed for the increased safety of the public.

References

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